

Using the News in the Classroom: A Discourse Approach

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This paper discusses the advantages of using news items coming from both the visual and the print media, that is, television and newspapers. The focus of attention lies on the ample variety of thought-provoking tasks that can be derived from viewing, reading and analyzing. It briefly discusses the methods of implementation and presents samples containing various possibilities of their use. From a more general perspective the authors will examine the evolving roles of EFL teachers. This examination is based on information gathered as part of a research project carried out at Comahue University, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

In the writing of this paper, both the roles of the teacher and the learner in the teaching-learning process are being taken into consideration: the teacher as an innovative leader and action researcher; the teacher and

the learner as critical thinkers; and the learner as strategy-user. In this article, therefore, we will concentrate on just one aspect of the constant technological breakthroughs that we are now witnessing at the end of the 20th century. Teaching is a transformational process in the sense that it modifies us continuously, and teacher educators at university level must provide the leadership needed to revamp their own education programs.

In this process, they need to adhere to the changes being undergone with new, challenging technology, in which the mass media play a crucial role. The use of news processing in the classroom is just one aspect of the changes in technology that is presently taking place. Undoubtedly, TV news and press, together with the impact of e-mail communication and Internet availability influence both teachers and learners in deep and profound ways.

The goal of this paper is, therefore, to show how these media can be profitably used and to provide training that is not only site-based but also contextual, and specific to the individual needs of the students.

Integrating Two Modes: The Press and the T.V.

The classroom situation should be an extension of the learner's world. In an everyday situation, the learner is surely exposed to both written and oral information coming from the press and TV. So why not implement the same procedure in the classroom? Both modes of presenting news and feature stories provide creative and original ideas for making effective use of the wealth of readily authentic, accessible and up-to-date English. The ultimate goal is to familiarize the

learner with journalese language, register and other stylistic devices that are at play when presenting a piece of news, both on TV and in the press, along with printed material found on the Internet. The tasks accompanying each text should give the learner confidence to read and view English language news in print and on the television for themselves outside the classroom. They should be challenged with increasingly demanding and thought-provoking tasks, which are practical and oriented to helping them enhance their thinking powers and develop their critical skills. In sum, the aim of this approach is to achieve autonomous learning by developing their strategic competence.

Methodology: Some Points to be Considered

Frequency of exposure

The most important point to bear in mind when using broadcast/print news is that the materials are a "resource."

They are in no way intended to be the only activity used during the course. They should be specifically designed to provide the learner with stimulating, topical, challenging and real material to support the course syllabus. Therefore, the teacher should decide when it is the most convenient moment to expose the students to mass media information. The news or T.V. clip should not be dated when shown to the learners. In a more specific situation, such as the case of students of Communication Studies (e.g., ESP course), the criteria may be slightly different. Experience shows that they profit a lot from being exposed to up-dated, daily material, which they have to process, that is, understand, retrieve and reconstruct after viewing or reading the news item. This is precisely what they are expected to do in their professional lives. Therefore, the frequency of exposure should depend on the students' needs, interests and time availability, as is the case with any other teaching endeavour.

Analysis of material

Teachers should consider text structure, length, linguistic difficulty (including vocabulary), and content of both the press and television news. All of these are important to any task to be presented to the student, and each can be manipulated as a variable in itself. Apart from dealing with the linguistic aspect, attention should also be drawn to the discovery of the macro structure of the whole text, since this constitutes a crucial criterion for the selection of the material.

A number of researchers (Carrell 1984, van Dijk 1990, among others) contend that the language included in news items is organized in particular patterns. Thus, teachers should set out to explore different texts so they can recognize the text patterns in each text. Then, this strategy should be explicitly taught and fostered as a skill in its own right. Passages should be analysed for differences which may predispose writers of certain subjects to use some strategies over others.

The learner should be able to recognize different patterns, such as an expository presentation with a problem-solution pattern, an argumentation or debate with a hypotheses-confirmation

format, or a sequencing of events presented in a narrative text. Likewise, the analysis and retrieval of information based on the layout, “infograms,” pictures, and personal responses to news stories should be encouraged.

The lesson should also develop critical viewing by providing the learner with problem-solving and research skills through the use of newsclips and newspaper cuttings and fast-paced graphics which depict formats and features. In the case of the broadcast news, the teacher should tape the program when it airs and show all or part of it to the class. For example, a teacher may begin with a review of the day’s or week’s top news stories. Discussion may focus on current issues and trends unfolding in the news. International news should be brought to the class so students can explore selected events around the globe. All sorts of topics may be discussed including business and commerce, science and medical achievements, and special features such as art, drama, music, and literature. As stated above, this choice should be based on course requirements, objectives, and the learner’s interests.

The learning of English can actually be facilitated and optimized by explicitly teaching the linguistic features, plus helping the learner become aware of the strategy required to extract meaning when confronted with oral or written media texts.

Selection of appropriate reading and viewing material

Length is an important factor in text selection. A news item should be long enough to allow the student to become involved in reading and viewing, but not so long that the student becomes fatigued by the demands of the task. A length of between five and ten minutes seems to be appropriate under most conditions. Less proficient learners may be asked to read or view shorter passages so that they will not feel the strain of an overload of information which may turn out to be difficult to process.

Another important factor for consideration should be the level of difficulty. The cognitive load imposed by reading and viewing the piece of news should not be so great as to prevent the learner from being able to process what the learner has seen or read; nor should the text be so far below the learner’s ability that it is only perceived at a superficial level, thus encouraging little strategy use. Material with subject matter entirely unfamiliar to the learner is to be avoided. Possible subject matter variables include overall level of foreign language proficiency, conceptual competence, and familiarity with the news item. Topics having to do with the human condition, such as family relationships, education, environmental problems, or issues of everyday life, provide interesting material as long as they are universal enough to be understood.

The same piece of news should be presented in the two modes, oral (television) and written (printed reports from the Internet and newspapers) from different angles, as far as possible. The learner should be conversant with the piece of news by first reading about it and then watching it on television, or vice versa.

For advanced students, critical debate should be fostered. To help foster a critical debate, it is suggested that information be obtained from several newspapers or their web sites. The learner should be able to compare and contrast different treatments of the same news item. They should be asked to identify different points of view and comment on the subjectivity of the news item.

For groups with higher levels of proficiency, another aspect to be covered in class is the function of persuasion in the news, since no piece of news or editorship is devoid of it. In doing so, the students can retrieve the most important aspects of the news story, take the roles of the journalists, and reconstruct or rewrite their own version of the story.

Toward a Methodology

To achieve the goals of the lesson, we suggest that the teacher provide the students with guidelines that may be applied to all kinds of texts. In our classes we use the traditional five Ws (who/whom, what, when, where, and why/how) as the basic procedure. We then use a set of more detailed elicitation tasks to go deeper into the essence of the story. With respect to televised news (CNN, for example), we apply the view-internalize-retrieve-reconstruct technique by which the learner is constantly required to relate the new information with prior knowledge. In the case of print items, the read-internalize-retrieve-reconstruct technique is applied in a similar fashion. The view/read stage involves all the steps that gradually lead first to the general and then to a more detailed comprehension or internalization of the text in question. When the learner retrieves information, he/she is expected to select those chunks that are essential for the understanding of the material. Finally, the learner should be able to give one of the many possible versions of this interpretation: his/her own, based on the material that has just been read or viewed.

In order to explore the methods delineated above, we will look next at the mechanics of a lesson plan. For the purpose of this article, we will concentrate on the analysis and learning tasks, using a CNN program as an example.

Using CNN in the Classroom

As stated above, bringing the news into the classroom offers a whole range of interesting possibilities to enhance the learner's command of the English language. When it comes to the oral and/or visual mode in particular, CNN offers a series of lively programs of the kind we normally watch to become informed about what goes on in the world. Our basic contention is that, because of the viewer's familiarity with the mechanisms implemented when watching these programs without the use of L1, the learner can be helped to transfer the skills employed in L1 to comprehend, analyse, and interpret the news items in the foreign language.

As with any recorded material, news on a videotape has many advantages: it can be repeated, moved forward and backward, and stopped. We suggest that the lesson format be organized for viewing as follows: 1. viewing the news item straight through, 2. breaking it into snippets, and 3. assigning tasks. The added dimension of visual text may be exploited so that, for example, the material may be looked at without turning on the sound. This enables the viewer to concentrate exclusively on the context in which the incident of the piece of news is taking place, that is, on all the nonlinguistic information which is so important in helping us to interpret and reconstruct what is being said in any news report.

Likewise, we can use the pause button on the videocassette recorder (VCR) and freeze the picture on the screen, which enables us to think and talk about what happened up to a certain point and to predict what is about to follow. A simple and versatile guide to integrating CNN into the classroom should be carefully planned. A specially designed worksheet should guide the student toward discovering the content and structure of the piece of news brought into focus. Task variables should include such things as text structure, familiarity of the content, comprehensibility of the oral input, and purpose of viewing. It goes without saying that a great deal of careful planning should go into any activity.

Of all the programs available on CNN, we generally choose newsclips from "World News," which is reported three times a day. In this program, world events are depicted both in brief and in detail, beginning with a short comment on the news item followed by the presentation of different viewpoints by various reporters. This is supported by visual texts. On the same day, the same news item can usually be found with the written counterparts of the text in an English newspaper and/or on the Internet Interactive CNN. Both the print and the visual can then be developed for use in the English class.

Planning the Sessions

Step 1: Preview

The preview session consists of tasks that are designed to provide an initial focus on the context in which the event has taken place. Warm-up activities may be used to discuss the news story the learner is about to see. If possible, the students should be required to read, in advance, the corresponding news item from an English newspaper or on the web page.

Step 2: Gist viewing

Global listening is important as a second step, since we have a number of clues at our disposal to anticipate and make assumptions about what the news presenter will talk about, aided by the nonverbal signals that help us interpret the message. News items and feature stories are good means to develop the skill of listening and other related skills, thanks to the visual support they provide (e.g., people speaking, gestures, body language, eye contact). The learner is actively involved in solving problems through hands-on tasks that involve locating and extracting specific information, matching, sequencing, selecting appropriate answers, agreeing/disagreeing with certain statements, taking notes, summarizing, and so on. These activities are aimed at developing not only language but also text organization.

At all times, it should be remembered that the learner is viewing for a purpose: interacting and reacting to the text rather than passively absorbing the visual and oral information transmitted to the viewer. After completing such tasks, the learner is given the opportunity to practice and extend the language heard in the sequence and to analyze the types of interaction by closely observing the linguistic input in various scenes.

Step 3: Focus on meaning

The overall objective of this stage is to train the learner to use the strategies needed to cope with the discourse of news or a particular text genre. The strategies of guessing, predicting, and inferring are fostered because they are of paramount importance in text processing in general. Since the learner brings much background knowledge to the listening and/or viewing task, the main objective should be to help the learner reconstruct one possible version of the news item under consideration. We should make the learner try to use the linguistic and strategic power that he/she has as an L1 user and transfer these abilities to the tasks at hand.

As stated above, we implement the traditional five Ws (who/whom, what, when, where, and why/how) as the starting point for the elicitation of most meaningful units of information. Once the answers to these questions have been sorted out, the learner should be required to engage in more challenging activities oriented towards the reconstruction of the story. At a later stage, more demanding tasks can be provided to help the learner unravel aspects related to the tone, subjectivity, and tendentiousness of the text under discussion and analysis.

Step 4: Focus on forms

This step focuses on the identification of rhetorical aspects such as the general pattern of text organization and macrostructure or scaffolding, as well as the use of the use of cohesive signals, different syntactic patterns, particular lexical items, and expressions that illustrate the idiomaticity of the language at play in this special jargon. Likewise, the learner's attention should be drawn to the stylistic devices and the tone of the story. By guiding the learner to focus on these formal aspects of the language, we will be training his/her receptive abilities and understanding of the indicators of additional meanings.

Step 5: Follow-up

In order to integrate the activities found in steps 1–4, additional follow-up tasks can be provided which will offer opportunities for the further consolidation of language functions, forms, and vocabulary as well as enriching background knowledge and culture. Special projects should be fostered to enrich and expand the learner's command of the language and knowledge of specific topics. In an increasingly competitive and globalized market, we need to ensure that our learner benefits from studying English by exposing the learner to authentic texts and practical approaches that can be enjoyed in a natural and nonthreatening environment.

A working method that has yielded highly positive results with many different types of recorded material is outlined in the Appendix.

Conclusion

Much remains to be done in order to determine what reading/viewing strategies learners use when confronted with this authentic material, both in the written and oral mode. By knowing what strategies language learners actually use when reading or listening/viewing, we will not only improve our comprehension of these skills as communicative acts but also our understanding of how they might be taught. Additional re-search is needed on how

reading/viewing strategies may vary depending on the background of the reader and the reading/viewing task itself.

Planning viewing activities based on CNN news, in particular, may be intimidating at first, but once the teacher begins to pilot some materials and gauge the students' interests and involvement, the possibilities begin to open up. It is our hope that this article may be useful for our colleagues, not as a cut-and-dried recipe, but as a framework to embark on tailor-made projects which respect your particular teaching-learning situation.

By considering the alternatives suggested in this article and by trying them out, you as a teacher will not only contribute to an understanding of how language works in a specific genre but also how best to perform as viewers and readers in an everyday context.

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Appendix

Work Sheet for Analyzing News

Write the name of the CNN program.

What is the event that led to this news report? (gist)

What background material (visual texts, graphics, statistics, charts, etc.) is used to support the linguistic information (reports, interviews)?

Is the background material sufficient for the understanding of the events?

Write down key words that will help you reconstruct the story presented in the news item.

How would you describe the tone of the documentary? Does it change throughout the story? If so, why do you think it does? Provide another headline for your own written version of the piece of news.